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A Confusing, Unnerving Payroll Crisis

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Washington, the company town run by politicians and held together by bureaucrats, suffered through an unnerving payroll crisis yesterday that virtually shut down some agencies and sent thousands of confused federal workers home by mid-day.

As many as 180,000 area government workers, part of an estimated 500,000 federal employees hit by President Reagan's funding veto, were abruptly furloughed throughout the city after agency chiefs determined that their government services were "nonessential."

The temporary lay-offs caused widespread confusion throughout the federal bureaucracy. Some agencies, like the Pentagon, were untouched and carried on with business as usual. Many others were hit hard; the Department of Agriculture, for example, sent half its employees home at noon.

Stunned by Reagan's actions, hundreds of workers flooded federal credit unions, jammed government switchboards with questions about pay and benefits and quickly juggled or canceled their Monday appointments, meetings and lunch dates.

By late afternoon, much of the morning's confusion and panic had turned mellow, even festive, for some, as Congress moved toward a makeshift resolution of the budget conflict that apparently forestalled further problems until Dec. 15. The unexpected "early slide" suddenly meant a chance to rush home and watch a favorite soap opera, get an extra drink or see a movie while waiting for the commuter bus home.

Before the payroll difficulties had been eased, the reaction of federal workers had ranged from anger by some and delight by others at the prospect of a few days off before the Thanksgiving holiday. The degree of

alarm seemed to depend on the state of one's finances rather than the state of the union.

"I'd like a furlough now, I've got a lot of house and yard work to do," said a cheery Marianne Ahmad, an employee at the Department of Health and Human Services who has worked for the government for 18 years.

For Rita Vilella, a wildlife biologist at the Interior Department, the order to go home at 2 p.m. was a paycheck-threatening announcement that she feared could threaten her rent payment. Vilella, 27, had another problem with the characterization of her work as nonessential.

"I don't like the way it sounds," she said. "I'd like to think we're doing some good work here."

Although the budget impasse between Congress and the president had been building all last week, most veteran federal workers — accustomed to yearly budget tugs-of-war — assumed this latest squabble would be resolved routinely. Until yesterday.

"I really didn't think it would get this far," said Larry Collins, a Department of Agriculture employee who has been a government worker for 27 years. "I figured it would be resolved by now. The man [Reagan] made history."

For federal workers, that history included rumors, contradictory information, confusion, and the dispirited feeling of being caught in the middle of a conflict that was not of their making. And the situation didn't do much for government car pools, either.

"I can't go home yet," said one woman who answered the telephone at the Internal Revenue Service after most everyone else in her office had cleared out. "The guy who drove today is essential."

Walter Okamoto, 39, spent a very long lunch hour in the basement cafeteria at the Interior Department, waiting for official word on whether he was being sent home. The question was one of some urgency since Okamoto, who injured his leg recently and is on crutches, was hoping to catch a ride with his van pool back to Warrenton, Va.

"As of noon, they've all been put on leave without pay, and they're just waiting for me," said the 15-year government veteran, who was furloughed at 2 p.m.

For the federal workers who began streaming out their offices and into the streets between noon and 3 p.m., going straight home was not necessarily their first impulse. Many lingered on the doorsteps of their agencies, uncertain about what to do and where to go.

Not everyone had that problem.

"I'm going to a movie — either the French sex comedy or the Italian sex comedy," said one employee at the Environmental Protection Agency, who was looking forward to the day off.

Delba Durrough was sent home from the Commerce Department at noon with the advice to listen to the news for information about when to come back to work. She called the furlough decision "raunchy" but was cooling her anger with plans to "go home and watch 'General Hospital.'"

Low- and mid-level workers weren't the only ones caught off guard by the sudden furloughs. Several of the government's top officials, including Vice President Bush, discovered they, too, were subject to the guidelines governing essential and nonessential business.

Bush had to cancel a scheduled business trip to New York because of the absence of operating funds, and about 75 percent of the vice president's staff was sent home by noon.

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